Editorial

The Future of Nursing Research

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Arguably nursing scholarly literature has been the victim of its success, and having peaked is now in danger of decline. This seems in part to be influenced by the desire/need for nurse academics to be published and cited, leading to a proliferation of review papers, which are cited (and therefore published) much more frequently than original research (Miranda & Garcia-Carpintero 2018). The research that is undertaken, and published, is often descriptive, with research papers unable to influence practice (Richards et al., 2014; Vehvilainen-Julkunen &, Saarti 2012; Richards et al., 2018). Alongside this, there is a worldwide shortage of suitably qualified and experienced nurses (Alsufyani et al., 2020) and the practice of nursing has arguably also reached a nadir (Richards & Borglin 2019) that requires sound research to turn it around. However, there is widespread evidence, including from the Middle East (Gkantaras et al., 2016), that highly trained nurses improve patient outcomes.

Much current nursing evidence also appears to focus on secondary, and often misleading outcomes (Watson & Hayter 2020) such as patient satisfaction, rather than focusing on nursing interventions and health improvements as outcomes. There has also been a repeated call for greater publication of experimental research studies, including high-quality systematic reviews (limited by the lack of primary evidence to include), that inform practice (Richards et al., 2014; Vehvilainen-Julkunen &, Saarti 2012; Richards et al., 2018; Mantzoukas, 2009; Hopia & Heikkilä 2020). Although these suggestions focus on the content of published articles, it is important to consider the focus of nursing research.

We suggest that the five areas crucial to delivering improved health outcomes for patients are: the population health challenges facing communities and society; the individual health challenges facing patients and their families; the nursing interventions that are effective in tackling these two areas of the challenge; insights into behavioral factors (both in patients, and professionals) that affect health outcomes; and critical understanding, education, and development of an effective workforce.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of population health challenges is hard to miss. However, that is only one element in wider societal or global changes that impact health, which include climate change, social upheaval caused by war, famine, and migration, new and emerging infections, increasing antimicrobial resistance, aging populations, and the increasing prevalence of chronic and non-communicable diseases. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals form one useful framework on which to hang nursing research, practice, and leadership (Osingada & Porta 2020), but by no means the only stimulus to asking probing research questions.

As mentioned, the increasing prevalence of chronic and non-communicable diseases, alongside the development of new health technologies and interventions is a second field worthy of nursing research. There are opportunities to explore and understand the nursing interventions that impact experience and outcome following a change in health – this is possibly the area of inquiry that is most amenable to experimental rather than observational research and nurses with experience in undertaking intervention studies should be supported, funded, and developed to maximize their expertise and impact. Henly et al (Henly et al., 2015; Henly et al., 2015; Henly et al., 2015), working within the North American context, identified Patient Reported Outcomes as an important area for nursing research – one that has already been picked up by doctoral-level students (Strobehn et al., 2021). She additionally highlighted the need for research using 'large data' and advanced quantitative approaches, and research into both behavioral sciences (related primarily to patients, but arguably equally important in professionals) and health economics. Careful thought needs to be given as to whether these priorities are universal or specific to the context within which Henly and colleagues were working. Areas highlighted by other nurse academics as ripe for research include the impact of nurse practitioners and other specialist practitioners (Currie et al., 2022) and an understanding of complex interventions (Richards & Borglin 2011).

The challenge for nurses, and therefore nursing journals, is the relatively small size of studies undertaken within nursing. However, there is a circular issue that mitigates against improvement. If editors do not publish smaller studies based on solid science, then funding for larger pieces of work will continue to be hard to find, so the studies with greater power will never be undertaken. There is a place for publishing the (sometimes exploratory) results from small studies that highlight gaps in the evidence and trial research approaches that deserve further exploration.

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